“the ghost” of a smile, wittily turns the trilogy back on itself. But, even in this mazelike series of scenes, where we become more and more confused as to what is real and what is pretend, the ancient figure of Pele is able to bring a resonance that is uncanny and disturbing in its implications: a feather is a real object that might fall from a bird, but, in the realm of sign-making known as drama, it can also be a word in the mouth of an actor or a feather-catching gesture made by an actor. This sense of doubleness pervades Kneubuhl’s dramas, no more so than in the way “spirits” are both the powerful presences of the dead and also the tongue-loosening liquors that come in bottles and saturate all three plays in the trilogy.

It is impossible to consider adequately the achievement of this trilogy in a short review. The worry must be that Kneubuhl’s work will fall between various cracks and not be sufficiently read or staged. A contemporary, commercial theatre could regard his dramatic writing as too wordy, yet he is no more so than, say, Brian Friel, whose plays in recent years have been staged on the mainstream drama circuit of the English-speaking world. And, though all comparisons are unfair and invidious, Kneubuhl’s writing, which deals with some of the same themes as Friel’s, seems to me much subtler and richer. But, because of Kneubuhl’s cultural particularity, he is much less likely to be noticed. I hope this book begins a process whereby his plays become more widely known. The presentation of the text is clear and uncluttered. The editor’s note, along with the afterword, the glossary, and the delightful photo of Kneubuhl in his garden, make this an attractive publication.

MURRAY EDMOND
University of Auckland


Where We Once Belonged, a first novel by Samoan writer Sia Figiel, is a work of great courage and power. Winner of a Commonwealth Writer’s Prize for Best First Book (Southeast Asia–South Pacific region), the novel has stirred some controversy among Samoans and other students of cultural politics in Polynesia. When I taught Figiel’s work in university literature courses in Sāmoa, emotions inevitably ran high among both my students, who typically loved it, and colleagues, who often found it troubling at best and reprehensible at worst. One fellow lecturer illustrated her own revulsion from the work by describing the sight of a close friend (and fundamentalist minister) literally trashing the book after reading the first line. In an interview Figiel herself reports being challenged by a local “cultural expert”
after a reading in Samoa: Why didn’t she write about the great respect in Samoan culture? Why not write about the good things? And so, we might ask, why all the fuss?

Why does this tale of Alofa Filiga, the thirteen-year-old heroine, a bright and sensitive lass, coming of age in a small, tropical village—by her own wits and against the odds—in neocolonial Samoa of the late twentieth century, incite such fervor among readers in her own land? She is after all, a mere child growing up, exploring her world in the way of a child, posing the usual questions. “What’s that supposed to mean?” she repeatedly asks herself and her girlfriends—a self-styled trio of television’s Charlie’s Angels, amid their adolescent explorations, intrigues, and endless talk. What is she to make of the surging mysteries of hormones and friendship, betrayal and forgiveness? What sense can be made when the imagined glories of fairytale New Zealand—ad copy happiness derived from cornflakes, chunky catfood, and miraculous cleaning products, turn into ashes and despair, rejection and loss? Why are girls thought to be cursed to “grow up and continue the cycle of being seduced by middle-aged men”? Why do love and violence go hand in hand? How can God allow her friend Lili to keep getting raped by her own father? Why does “real love” mean that children must get “beaten up bad by their parents”? As the novel publicly breaks the silence encrusted around such difficult questions, it is small wonder that certain cultural “authorities” feel moved to object.

By way of formal contrast to such emotionally charged content, the novel’s circular structure provides a kind of solace and cultural resonance. Shaped along the curving lines of a Samoan siufefilo, or garland of song, the narrative thread winds its way through Alofa’s growing pains and traces her passage from childhood into young adulthood. As metaphor the image of garland (‘ula) or necklace appears in various guises, light and dark, throughout the tale. We hear schoolchildren implicitly comforting each other through the terrors and shame of classroom whippings: “Our sorrow or fear were like flowers in the morning dew. We sewed our sorrow and fear into ‘ula, and offered it to the victim for consolation.” Childhood pain and fear continually get stitched into garlands of sympathy and solidarity, of talk and friendship, the refuge of the “we” in this communal ethos, the consoling embrace that eases loss.

The threads of Alofa’s personal story weave in and out of a broader cultural tapestry, the neocolonial narrative of circular migration—Pacific peoples, Islanders themselves moving as ocean currents among faraway islands and back home again. In this novel we see villagers departing from Samoa for the promised land of metropolitan New Zealand, only to return sooner or later in varying degrees of disillusionment or dishonor. We hear of Siniva, Alofa’s alter ego in the tale, the village madwoman who has fallen from the imagined grace of European mana (spiritual power) to the rocky soil of mundane, provincial life in a tiny village. Returning home with her university learning, her master’s degree in history, her highfalutin critique (if you please!) of Christianity as bringing
Darkness instead of the Light, and a blindness induced by “too many Bibles and cathedrals,” a crippling dinness from the choking glut of too many cars and tin houses, plastic diapers and soda cans, television and junk food, Siniva finds her village homecoming a tad chilly. As bearer of these less-than-glad tidings from the fantasy isles of New Zealand, Siniva is branded as hopelessly crazed and summarily dispatched into exile from kith and kin.

After a sojourn beneath the town clock tower yelling at passing tourists to go back where they came from “you fucking ghosts! Gauguin is dead! There is no paradise!” Siniva repairs to the outer edges of the village. Living alone, blind, and reviled as the village idiot, Siniva has no one to talk to but animals, who start turning up with instructions for her from the ancestors: she must tell stories of the old gods to the children; she must tell them that the ancient ones still live on. Reenter our heroine Alofa, still searching for what things are “supposed to mean.” What, for example, is she to make of dream communiqués from leaves? “Leaves talk to me at night when ‘I’ exist. They show me their bones and their blood, too.” Thus do seeker and sage connect, the child-woman Alofa and the prophetess Siniva, beyond the pale of noisy village life, outside the conventional embrace of the “we.” This epiphany at last places Alofa in a direct line of cultural transmission, to receive from another human being spiritual teachings, the sacred stories of ancestors that had so far visited her only in dreams and the voices of leaves. In this essential recognition and reconnection with her past through Siniva, the classically blind seer, Alofa can at last receive some redeeming knowledge of her history, a perspective and larger framework that can encompass and give meaning to the ruptures of a childhood haunted by secrets and silences.

Finally, there will be Siniva, who, on the other hand, will not go out in silence. When she makes her permanent departure from the scene, she will go out trailing stories in her wake; she will go out smiling. The fishermen who find her body later will say that they’ve “never seen anyone die with such a happy face.” This is her legacy to her protégée Alofa: the possibility of choice itself; the imperative for speech, for breaking silences, for opening locked doors and telling stories, what really happened; the imperatives of story and history, to give meaning and context to the present moment.

Figiel’s writing style is rich and many-layered, a fitting reflection of the complex world of contemporary Samoan life. For example, a striking chapter called “The Centre” details a sensory landscape of the farmers’ market in town. Sounds and sights amplify and compete for attention. Fire-and-brimstone preaching mingles with the squealing of pigs, the shy laughter of courting teenagers, the colors of fat orange pumpkins and heaps of green leafy vegetables, the smells of fresh fish, and hot, greasy pancakes for sale. Old women seated by their stalls, smoking local tobacco wrapped in newsprint from the Samoa Times. The novel presents a believable world, one that is both sensuous and vital, humorous as well as painful: a rich mix and complex background for an adolescent
village girl’s search for some meaningful, coherent sense of selfhood.

In a novella called *The Girl in the Moon Circle*, published nine months after *Where We Once Belonged*, Figiel further explores many of the same themes in the same village of Malae-fou, the “new gathering place.” The novella itself presents mirror images, a looking glass held up by little sisters, of the novel *Where ...*. Here we meet a circle of pubescent girls, younger versions of the teen-aged Alofa and her coterie in *Where ...*, sitting together at night, sharing stories, and discussing the secrets and mysteries of their world. Their circle is the junior wire service of the village, their refuge from the sudden storms of adult rage, hypocrisy, and guilt. In addition to the usual childhood fears of rejection and loss, these girls must grapple on their own with questions of cultural identity in a world turned upside down by the ruptures of neocolonial interventions from the western world, specifically that of New Zealand.

Here the heroine is a budding philosopher, the ten-year-old Samoana Pili, “Ana” to her friends and *Charlie’s Angels* wanna-bes. Here, as in *Where ...*, the consoling heart of the novella lies in the circle of girls talking story every night. They speak of secrets, of sexual violation that is commonplace for them, a given: of incest, and Tauese’s father exposing himself to his daughter’s friends, inviting them to touch his “lollipop.” They speak casually of the snow-cone man who gives them free treats in exchange for sexual favors from their friend Misa who really “doesn’t mind,” or so she says. They share and process village news: who has the first or best television or refrigerator from the legendary New Zealand; who has had the bloodiest beating from her parents; who has a crush on whom; who’s had the latest abortion. They break taboos and discuss secrets, like the suicides: the New Zealand scholarship student who wasted his talents and disgraced himself by drinking, flunking out of university, and getting a girl pregnant; the village boy who drank weed killer after his father forbade him to ever again go into town, that “centre of all evil”; and their own circle friend Ina, who hung herself from the breadfruit tree after being publicly shamed by her father and falsely accused of fornication with the pastor’s son. Despite the cultural taboo against mentioning suicides, the circle friends do it anyway; they remember those lost ones and speak their names, repeat their stories.

A thematic thread in the novella traces the ways in which children, particularly young girls, are silenced and disempowered by a hierarchical communal milieu like that of the fictitious “Malaefou.” “No one listens to us. No one hears us.” These girls make up the domestic workforce who wash dishes, look after all younger children and babies, pick up leaves, cigarette butts, and beer bottles. Like Alofa and her adolescent peers in *Where We Once Belonged*, Ana and her friends have created a space of their own in which they can both be heard and speak freely; in the nightly circle they can listen to each other. In a social world that seems largely bereft of adult protection, they can offer each other a safe haven.
The one possible role model who might have offered some conceptual framework for understanding their experience is Siala, “the educated one,” who returns home from her New Zealand university sporting hippie attire and a countercultural “belief system that shocked the whole of MalaeFou.” The girls are “completely mesmerized” by freethinking Siala who breaks all the rules, who is the only adult to visit their circle and “actually” talk with them; who earns their respect and fascination by “verbalizing what we all felt”: doubts about the blue-eyed “Taiwan Jesus” hanging in their homes, or the naturalness of their sexual attraction for boys. Like her literary counterpart, Siniva, in Where We Once Belonged, Siala too is shunned by family and dismissed as a madwoman. Effectively silenced by village conventions, she too will disappear permanently from the scene. Contrary to the pivotal mentor-protégée connection that Siniva and Alofa make in Where We Once Belonged, however, here the younger Ana is left to her own devices, feeling “So much ambiguity! So much confusion!” and finally, bewilderment and pity for the departed Siala.

One of the key elements common to both works of fiction is Figiel’s invocation of legendary and mythological figures from Samoan cultural history, in particular that of Pili, the mischievous demigod. In view of the central and defining role played by this legend in both narratives, I find Figiel’s demonizing of Pili somewhat problematic. While this question is clearly another story for another time, it seems to me worthy of at least passing mention here. Given Pili’s consistent appearance in the role of culture hero in a series of well-documented versions of his legendary cycle dating from the 1840s and recorded on several different islands of Sāmoa, I find his literary demotion by Figiel to the status of villain and “defeated” god somewhat mystifying. This rendition of the Pili legend serves to re-present a kind of authenticating narrative of gender relations in work that significantly engages issues of gender in relation to power, culture, and identity in Sāmoa. Given Figiel’s stated concerns with producing “meaning” and “reinforcing the value or the power of mythology,” her essential recasting of a major legendary figure raises issues of cultural representation and literary license.

True to the circular form of narrative established in Where We Once Belonged, The Girl in the Moon Circle begins and ends with children’s circle songs, which effectively echo the novella’s structural embrace. On the other hand, I found the apparently random blurring of narrative voices between that of the ten-year-old Ana and that of some unknown adult (the author herself?) less effective as a formal strategy and generally distracting. In view of the “oral” style of Figiel’s writing voice, coupled with the challenge of maintaining the narrative voice of a child with only the most rudimentary English skills, the question of consistent voice and perspective must surely have been a daunting one. Given such unresolved aesthetic issues of form and content, The Girl in the Moon Circle is a much less polished work than Where We Once Belonged. However, what the novella lacks in
consistency of voice or perspective, it abundantly makes up in vitality and fine storytelling.

As a Samoan woman and writer myself, I can fully appreciate some of the fearsome and contested boundaries that Sia Figiel had to cross in the telling of these particular stories. How can we begin to speak openly of the violence of internalized colonialism and the ways that this violence scars us all, our bodies and our hearts, and especially those of the most vulnerable among us, our children? In both works Figiel walks down such difficult roads speaking of such difficult matters, thus opening a public space among Pacific Islanders of all ages for dialogue and reflection on crucial issues of survival, issues relevant to indigenous peoples of any culture. In these brave works, Figiel breaks silences by speaking the many names of loss, thus opening spaces for mourning and healing as well. By lending her literary voice to the stories of children, she gives the necessary gift of their painful clarity, their terrible truths, their healing wisdom. Above all, perhaps, she brings a particular voice that has been too long neglected in Pacific Islands literatures and elsewhere: that of a girl child asking for and receiving what she needs.

CAROLINE SINAVAIANA-GABBARD
University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa


Mānoa was founded in 1988 by members of the Department of English, University of Hawai‘i, aiming “to showcase new writing from North America alongside exciting contemporary work from the many countries and regions of Asia and the Pacific.” It is a hard task keeping literary journals afloat and even harder when they attempt to cross from a specific market into cosmopolitan, transnational, or transregional cultural zones. Mānoa has succeeded for nearly ten years in promoting an international outlook with a firm sense of local consciousness in an elegant format. It is an achievement worthy of high praise.

This issue has two “standing places”—a photo essay and commentary on efforts to reclaim traditional taro cultivation and water supply from agribusiness and state control in Hawai‘i, and a collection of contemporary Māori writing from Aotearoa–New Zealand. The conflictual nexuses of culture, identity, economics, and politics in both cases quickly become clear and are complemented by personal essays on the politics of tourism in Nepal and Tunisia. Internationalizing from a local base is reflected in Gavan Daws’ interview with Hugh Moorhead, who, from his time on Tinian